

TOWARDS THE LIGHT

Michelle Spencer found she had to drop the baggage before she could find the light.

H“Hold the light for me!” My son’s voice carries effortlessly down the hallway, where it finds me at 11 o’clock, past my bedtime and less than enthusiastic about his slumber party. The teenage boys are engaged in some sort of torchlit shenanigans.

I think about being the kind of parent that walks down the hall and tells them all to shut up. Before I can haul myself out of bed, I drift off, listening to the sounds of laughter and tumbling teens...

When I was nineteen I set off for London for a six week holiday. Boarding my flight with fellow young adventurers, I couldn’t help but notice a rather obvious disparity between us. I was busy lugging an overpacked (old school) suitcase across the airport carpet whilst they were hands-free strolling with brand new backpacks. The funny thing is that I ended up travelling around Europe for over a year, dragging that case from port to station to tarmac. Throughout the continent, I struggled with its decidedly unergonomic load – it simply never occurred to me to ditch it for a backpack. I became resigned to its weighty burden.

I was a bit like that when it came to carrying stuff around. From the time I was a little girl, I carted around a whole truckload of trauma. I brought it into most situations, relationships and even jobs – it was *my stuff*. Although it was heavy and hard, I just couldn’t seem to drop it. When I eventually managed to throw my bag overboard, it was largely due to an immersion in yoga.

I think it was vanity and ego that first invited yoga into my twenties. The desire for toned arms and nice legs. Funny to think that it was also yoga that forced me to wrangle that ego into submission. That was the trick you see, tight buns masquerading as the end of suffering.

Yoga has a way of seducing the weak and wanting. I began to explore it and was surprised at how it made me feel. After a one hour class, I felt lighter, in body and mind. I was happy to work a little less to get to three classes a week. Before I knew it, yoga had worked its way into my life without me having to think about it.

After my children were born, yoga became my release; time to have my body all to myself. My two one-hour classes a week, became my sanctuary. I loved the

philosophy and the focus on self-care. Ahimsa was a welcome concept to my type A personality. I began to research teacher training options.

I had brochures for six-week intensives and nine month immersions but both seemed awfully fast-paced. I’d read BKS Iyengar’s *Light on Life* and I knew there was a lot to learn. Plus my hamstrings were so tight (and my back was a little dodgy), I felt like I needed time to soften and strengthen. I signed up for an eighteen-month teacher training course with Ruth Campbell at Pine Rivers Yoga. I thought it might give me the grounding I needed but I wasn’t prepared for the way that it would transform my body, mind and spirit.

SHINE A LIGHT INTO SHADOWS

When the course began, I wouldn’t say that I was entirely committed to my practice. I was busy juggling a life that included three children, work and a home that encapsulated the chaos. My relationship with my partner was poorly tended and I was also fairly absorbed in carting around my aforementioned rubbish.

When I met my teacher she really shone the light on the practice of yoga. My



very first class left me feeling taller, stronger and inspired. Later, she also illuminated the shadows in my life. At times I felt insecure, fragile and afraid. These are the days I am most grateful for, these were the moments Ruth really taught me something. She encouraged me to extend my body, in order to understand my mind. As I found my way into my body I began to get a real understanding of how my mind had created illusion all around me.

For years I'd been telling myself stories that weren't actually true *in the present moment*.

I had been a meditator for about 20 years before beginning teacher training. I'd fluffed about with different styles with differing degrees of success. I even had a moment of pure clarity once, in my early twenties. The big-bang meditation of exotic travel documentaries and yoga books, all hallelujah and heavenly realisation – but it soon dissipated into the realm of dreams.

I noticed that every day I was different, every time I hopped on my mat. My practice had started to emerge.

Too pure for my sullied mind to make any sense of. It became like a mirage, shimmering in the distance, without any hope of quenching my thirst. I felt like the experience had arrived like a parcel meant for someone else.

This mild frustration lasted for years. I continued with 'meditation' but I sat squarely in my unrest. My monkey mind was quite happy for an opportunity to jump around for 20 minutes. Similar to rounding my spine in a forward bend, I just wanted to touch my bloody toes! Who cares if I'm doing it *properly*? So what? My meditation was like some glossy Instagram photo, all show and no shovel. I felt like I might never dig myself out of my very deep cavernous hole.



My perfect practice

LET GO OF LABELS

Then I began my immersion in yoga and began to very slowly unravel these illusions that I had created; the stories I had told myself about *being* a meditator, a yogi, a tortured artist (that's a great

trip). All just labels that my ego loved. I began to see the benefit of meeting myself every day, without the tall tales. I noticed that every day I was different, every time I hopped on my mat. My practice had started to emerge.

I began teacher training with gusto. I've always liked learning, possibly because I was relatively good at it and, with this in mind, I was quite happy to bring my ego along for the ride. I answered every question I could, palm extended towards the heavens like a little kindergarten version of myself. Wanting to make friends and get noticed, I'm not too proud to say, wanting to appear like I knew something about this thing called yoga.

God knows I know a thing or two about

stuff that has nothing to do with our divine nature. Which also brings me back to that little kindergarten me with her giant suitcase. She decided, against my better judgement, to accompany me to a bandhas workshop with Claire Priestley and she carted along a whole bag full of shit that I'd been trying to hide under my bed.

In Upward Bow Pose she pressed the tiny locks on my suffering, flipped the lid and let the contents tumble out. I felt something stir in my gut, some weary old wound that rose to my throat and brought a flood of tears. I was so embarrassed, horrible to be that kid crying at school *again*. Claire patched me up with compassion and understanding and shone a light on the path ahead.

"Just keep going," she urged. "You'll be okay."

Thanks to Claire's kindness, I kept going in the right direction with varying degrees of dedication. I found it hard to practice daily, still do. I loved classes and reading philosophy and thinking about yoga – I just found it hard to *do* yoga. My mind was consumed with finding something to set me free.



permeated every facet of my ego, making me 'the sad one' the 'she-who-had-the-crappy-childhood'.

In that rather boo-hoo moment, I instantly saw the true meaning of the word *love* and, as it turns out, I had it all wrong. This bizarre gift of clarity quite literally fell from the sky and made its new home in that great big hole of mine. I had mistaken love for a kind of currency – I either paid too much or wasn't getting enough. All of my adult relationships were administered by this shadow and, quite frankly, I deemed myself to be in the red. (This was often poorly perceived and not calculated by rational means).

But... in that quick little moment of lucidity I saw that love was actually like the ocean in front of me. Expansive, endless and infinite, all I had to do was stop feeling sorry for myself and step in. If I believed in God or Allah or Krishna, which I don't, I'd probably tell you he spoke to me that day.

"Step in." Just enter a state of love every day. It doesn't matter if you give

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it to your kids, your dog or the woman at the grocery store – it's limitless. By making the decision to love every day, you'll never *need* again.

I cried my eyes out on that beach and told the kindergartener she had to throw that case to the fishes. I told my ego I could do without its constant input. I was bored with my perpetual tap dancing for attention. I walked up the beach and went back to my

beautiful family, ate fish and chips and felt transformed.

I don't know what happened that day but I haven't been the same since. I know *how* it happened. It had something to do with some strange postures named after animals and dead sages. Some bendy moves and a whole lot of peace love and kindness. I don't understand it but in some small area of my heart I was beginning to know it. Something shone the light on my own perfection on the beach that day.

THERE'S POWER IN GRATITUDE

Having emotional baggage is a bit like growing a huge weedy garden around you. You've tended to it for ever and, whilst it's not pretty, it's so big you can't see the outside world. Which is great because you don't trust *that place*. So you keep fertilising it until it becomes just too big, too close and the weed-prison feels like your whole world. In fact, you just need to make the decision to trust the universe and spray the damn thing. Then, once it's dead, the sun comes out and gratitude is possible. There is so much power in gratitude that it enables forgiveness.

I saw my ego that day on the beach and I recognised with total clarity that it was *I* that was making me unhappy. No single person had ever hurt me as much as I hurt myself. By making the decision to lug that hurt around with me every day, I was letting my ego/identity/story get in the way of a blessed life. The responsibility was entirely my own.

The true test came a few weeks later when Ruth recommended me for a teaching job. I was qualified but inexperienced and therefore expected some upsurging from my old self. A little self-sabotage or an unrealistic expectation of perfection. For a fleeting moment I did think about how totally rubbish I am at inversions. How could I possibly teach when I'm a massive yoga fraud? – Blah blah blah....

Then that nice new part of me took over the trolley. I urged myself forward with humble expectations and good

DUMP THE BAGGAGE

One day I was walking down the beach by myself – a rare thing in a mother's life. I looked out at the ocean and had a sudden realisation that I had spent my entire life feeling deprived. Even with this beautiful beach, my family waiting for me, I felt a deficiency of love in my life.

That suitcase of crap that my five year old self was still dragging around had impacted every day of my entire adult life. Its stinking contents had

preparation. I laughed when I told the class to flex their elbows instead of their ankles. I laughed when I fell over in dancer's pose, off the stage, prompting so much laughter from the class that they too fell over. I laugh all the time in fact, because as it turns out, I am not the most accomplished yogini. In fact the best way to describe me would be to say that I'm the yogini that *tries*.

I try and practice most days and I try and learn as much as I can. I try and do the best for my students and for myself. Every day I try and find the light, both in my practice and in my life. I even hold it up for others so that their path might not be so dark. When people come to class tired and troubled, my only job is to try and illuminate their loveliness. Step into the ocean people, yoga is going to keep you afloat and it's love that's going to make you happy.

HOLD THE LIGHT

I spend the next morning with grumpy

too-tired boys that are no longer fun and games. Over coffee, I recall their shouting, "Hold the light for me!"

I think about all the teachers that have held the light for me in my lifetime. I think about all those people that loved me despite my not-knowing, regardless of my imposing ego and my self-imposed prison of pain. There have been so many and I am grateful to them all. I welcome the lessons and I welcome the setbacks. It's all the same, good and bad, it's just stuff anyway.

I am now a yoga teacher and have the best job in the world. All that I know is not very much, but I try and learn something new every day. I'm still scared of inversions, anatomy sometimes eludes me and I'm fairly average at spelling Sanskrit. I would describe my approach to teaching as acquisitive. I have blatantly and unapologetically acquired my best cues from others, many from Ruth. My sincere wish is that when she hears herself

coming out of my mouth, she recognises the sincerest form of flattery.

I understand that it's not about me anyway. Even if I end up with my feet behind my head, in a bikini, on a beach in Bali, on bloody Instagram, with ten thousand students – it's still not about me. Or if I never manage a perfect forearm balance, it really doesn't matter; still nothing to see here. This is sacred work but it's not special.

I'm just a glorified lamp post who spends way too much on yoga clothes and I've never been happier.

Yoga is the light.

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